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DOMENICI HOPES "OPERATION TAR PIT" SIGNALS END OF HEROIN SCOURGE IN NEW MEXICO

Northern N.M. Investigation Leads to Arrests in Nine States by DEA & FBI

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Senator Pete Domenici, who helped focus federal law enforcement attention on the epidemic drug problems in northern New Mexico, today said he hopes arrests related to a nationwide Mexican black tar heroin drug ring linked to Rio Arriba County will help end the stranglehold the narcotic has on the Land of Enchantment.

Domenici was informed early Thursday by the Justice Department that the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) would begin making arrests in 12 cities today as part of "Operation Tar Pit." The operation targeted a black tar heroin ring based in Nayarit, Mexico, that was discovered as a result of an investigation initiated in New Mexico last year to combat the drug problem in the greater Española area.

The investigation of the Mexican-based drug ring also included the U.S. Attorney's Office, U.S. Customs Service, and the Internal Revenue Service. During a news conference today, Attorney General Janet Reno credited Domenici and the focus placed on northern New Mexico for leading to today's Operation Tar Pit activities.

Domenici issued the following statement regarding the federal law enforcement arrests today:

"I was pleased by Attorney General Janet Reno's comments regarding our work to fight the northern New Mexico drug problem. I greatly appreciate the multi-jurisdictional cooperation we have seen over the past year and a half to combat the problem in New Mexico.

"The people of northern New Mexico deserve so much of the credit for deciding to fight the drug problem that was crippling their families and communities. Their actions drew the necessary federal attention that led to exposure of this heroin trafficking organization with operations in more than 20 states.

"I hope these arrests are only the beginning of the effort to hack away the tentacles of Mexican drug trade in New Mexico and throughout the country. Their evil grasp on so many individuals and families in our state has been a nightmare."

Since the problem was brought to his attention several years ago, Domenici has been active in using his position in Congress to keep federal law enforcement resources focused on the New Mexico drug problem.

Domenici's work led to the 1999 formation of the "Rio Arriba Community Health and Justice Coordinating Council" which aims to harness local, state and federal resources in the fight against northern New Mexico's heroin epidemic. The council was the centerpiece of an anti-drug action plan released by Domenici last August.

Following Domenici's field hearing in March to investigate Rio Arriba County's drug epidemic, a federal technical assistance team headed by DOJ was assembled and dispatched to the region to conduct interviews with state and local policymakers, treatment providers, community representatives, and public officials. The August report released was the culmination of those findings.